

Land Conservationists Take On the National Guard



Larry Herr, a local conservationist, overlooking Fort Indiantown Gap, a 17,000-acre National Guard base just northeast of Harrisburg, Pa.

Mike Mergen for The New York Times

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FORT INDIANTOWN GAP, Pa., June 27 — There are few better vantage points than Hawk Watch to see both sides of the debate between the Pennsylvania National Guard and local conservationists.

Hawk Watch, a 30-yard-wide clearing named for its grand view of soaring raptors, is on the ridge of Second Mountain, about 12 miles northeast of Harrisburg and part of the Appalachian range.

“This is Stony Creek Valley,” said Larry Herr, pointing north to 44,000 acres of state-protected wilderness that is home to a nearly unaltered green carpet of hemlock, maple and oak trees going down the hillside to the valley 1,000 feet below.

Then, walking to the other side of Hawk Watch and looking south onto a 17,000-acre base operated by the Pennsylvania National Guard, Mr. Herr said with contempt: “And this is the Gap. Notice the difference.”

Amid large swaths of a similar tree canopy are pockets where the valley and hillside have been carved up for guard training areas, the trees removed and roads, buildings and ranges put in their place.

“That’s why we don’t want them over here,” said Mr. Herr, 67, a hunter who is part of the Stony Creek Valley Coalition fighting the guard’s request to use about 900 acres as a buffer for a new target range for Abrams M-1 tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. “We don’t trust them.”

In a series of public meetings, charges have flown back and forth about a lack of concern for the public and past environmental abuses by the Guard — charges the Guard denies — and accusations that sportsmen regularly trespass on Guard land.

“It’s tough,” said Col. Robert L. Hodgson, garrison commander at Fort Indiantown Gap. “You get into a debate and then there’s mudslinging, and that’s not what we’re about. We’re about training soldiers, and, unfortunately, I can’t do that in the space I’ve got and I can’t move the range anywhere else.”

Colonel Hodgson said that because there were many more residents on the southern boundary of the rectangular-shaped base, the new range had to be on the northern edge near Stony Creek Valley.

The Guard had another range that closed in 1997 when it discovered that some of the inert shells its tanks were firing were ricocheting over the ridge and landing in Stony Creek Valley. No one was injured, but the discovery raised concerns.

Adding a range will mean that many of the 145,000 troops — active, reserve and guard — who train there annually will not have to drive to Fort Drum, N.Y., or Fort Pickett, Ky., to practice firing their tanks and fighting vehicles.



A sign at the edge of Fort Indiantown Gap. The Guard wants to use 900 protected acres in Stony Creek Valley as a buffer for a target range.

Mike Mergen for The New York Times

In provisions that Guard officials say show their concern for opponents of the new range, the Guard has agreed not to restrict access by hunters during the major deer, bear and turkey hunting seasons, and it will not be allowed to build new roads or paths in the wilderness area.

The Stony Creek land is the largest wilderness area without a road in Eastern Pennsylvania and is home to first-rate hunting and fishing and a stretch of the Appalachian Trail.

On top of that, many members of the coalition were involved in the original effort to buy the land in the mid-1970s when an electric company wanted to build two hydroelectric dams in the valley.

“We went to all the trouble to save this, and now we’re fighting it again,” said Larry Westhafer, 62, a member of the original coalition.

The debate over the Stony Creek land has raged for three years, since the Guard first looked into the idea of taking ownership of up to 8,000 acres of the wilderness area, possibly in a land swap.

The Guard later reduced that request to 1,200 acres, and then abandoned the idea of owning the land altogether. Now it is simply hoping to get a “special use” agreement with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, which manages the land.

Despite the opposition from the coalition’s 75 sportsmen and environmental groups and 13 local governments, the Guard expects to sign an agreement in the next month with the president of the State Game Commission to restrict access to the 900 acres up to 90 days a year when the new range is in use.

If the agreement is signed, a splinter group of coalition members has said it would sue the commission.

“We’d sue because some of the money to purchase Stony Creek Valley came from federal funds that require it to be used only for the purpose it was acquired for,” said Harry Zirlin, the lawyer for the splinter group, “And that doesn’t include a buffer zone.”

Similar skirmishes with the military are occurring across the country. In Piñon Canyon in southeast Colorado near Fort Carson, farmers and environmentalists are fighting an effort by the Army to add 700 acres to a maneuver site, and in Plymouth, N.C., there is opposition to Navy plans to buy 30,000 acres to build an air base.

Here in Pennsylvania, Gov. Edward G. Rendell, who oversees both the Guard and the commission, supports the special use deal.

“We have worked closely with the citizens’ groups to try to ensure their interests are considered,” said Chuck Ardo, a spokesman for Mr. Rendell, a Democrat. “But it’s important that our soldiers who are being called to serve in the wars against terror are adequately trained, and that’s the purpose of this particular tract of land.”

Correction: July 4, 2007

An article on Monday about efforts by land conservationists to preserve natural areas being used by the National Guard for training exercises misidentified the state in which Fort Pickett, the home of a National Guard post, is located. It is Virginia, not Kentucky. The article also misstated the amount of land the Army is trying to acquire for a maneuver site in Piñon Canyon, near Fort Carson in Colorado. It is almost 700 square miles, not 700 acres.